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BOOKS OF THE DAY

Gide: The Self-Portrait

The Journals of André Gide, Vol. I, 1889-1913. Translated, with an introduction and notes, by Justin O'Brien. (Secker and Warburg. 25s.)

In this country as elsewhere there must be many to whom the reading of one or other of M. Gide's books has been so decisive an experience that ever afterwards they have followed his intellectual adventures with a special devotion and gratitude. Often, indeed, with a sense of bewilderment and dismay; the vagaries and contradictions of his character sometimes seem to defy explanation. The young aesthetic devoted to Mallarmé and the piano becomes the author of *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*; the Protestant obsessed with duty writes *L'Immoraliste*; he defends homo-sexuality in a style founded on the Bible; the passionate individualist, exponent of *Pacte gratuit*, becomes a Communist; the Communist writes *Retour de P.U.R.S.S.*; one cannot help being exasperated with M. Gide for being so contrary. Yet one's exasperation is perpetually soothed and calmed by the beauty of his style, by gratitude for the integrity which has animated his whole career as a writer, by admiration for one who after so many years and so many changes is always capable of one more change. "Never a man, I shall never be anything but an aged child." There is both cruelty and truth in this aside of M. Gide's.

For all who have succumbed to the charm of M. Gide's prose and the intricacies of his temperament, the publication of his journals in 1940 was an event which was not dwarfed even by the other events of the year. Surely now, one felt, in this intimate self-revelation continued for a period of over fifty years, one would at last find the clue to the labyrinths of his character. Alas! The clue, such as it is, only confirms one's bewilderment. Day by day, as he records himself in his journal, M. Gide is no more easy to grasp than in his works written for publication; indeed, if anything, he is less so. In the writings for publication the intensely subversive character of his thought is veiled by the purity, calm, lucidity of his style, surely one of the most beautiful instruments of expression ever created, yet one which completely realises the author's intention of always maintaining a certain reserve, a certain withholding of himself, even when he seems to pursue his thought to its extreme limit. With M. Gide the last word is never said. It never needs to be said. For in the end what seduces one most in him does not lie in the words but in something unexpressed, a melody, a spirit, that seems to emanate from his innocent-looking pages. These journals are without the graces of that style; they are written, deliberately, in haste, as the words come, and one might hope that their very roughnesses would allow one to see M. Gide more clearly. Perhaps or does; but only in the sense that the paths of a maze may be very well defined.

The truth is that M. Gide is, above all, a sinuous, subtle, furtive spirit that can flow into any mould and be contained by none. F

well one recognises that spirit in these pages, whether in society or alone, at work or in idleness, whether commenting on literature or on life, or on that inexhaustible fount of interest, himself. Never fully committed, even at moments of greatest enthusiasm or rapture, he always retains the capacity of evading the intimate embrace, of drawing back from the advances he has himself provoked (follow the fortunes of Gérard in these pages), and with courtesy, gentleness, abnegation, turning elsewhere. Yet having said this, one is immediately aware of two other qualities no less marked than his fearful sinuosity. It is not wholly natural, spontaneous; in a sense it is *gonacht*, intentional, deliberate. Hence arises from time to time a sense of acute irritation with the *willfulness* of his character. M. Gide, everything by turns and nothing long, is yet the most obstinate of men, obstinate, above all, in being himself, whatever that may be. The fascination of these journals is that M. Gide has no better idea than you or I what that is, except that at any given moment he is pretty sure it is not what he appears to be, or will not be for long.

In many men such persistent self-transformations would be unendurable. In M. Gide we pardon them because in the end they rest upon his conviction, persisting through all his changes, that somehow or other, somewhere or other, with someone or other, by some means or other, there exists for us in this life the possibility of intense joy and ecstasy. Others have believed this; the peculiarity of M. Gide is that he takes the *somehow or other* seriously, and at any moment is willing to pursue it wherever it may lead him, whatever the cost in old loyalties, old affections, friendship, reputation, even self-respect. In this sense he is above all a protestant, both in the sense of protesting indefatigably against everything that restricts our capacity for new life, and in the older sense of protesting his faith that man is born for joy. In the end, perhaps, it is this that most of all makes us respect, admire and revere him; even though at the same time one remains uneasily conscious that he who guides himself entirely by his own inner light inevitably finds himself sometimes in darkness. Yet, after all, one of M. Gide's great charms is that he loves to err, so long as it is by himself.

In its daily development, as we see it in this journal, the career of such a man presents an enthralling and exhilarating spectacle. This volume takes us from M. Gide at the age of twenty, an introspective young aesthete devoted to the Bible, the piano and Mallarmé, to M. Gide at the age of forty-four, a man of letters and, almost in spite of himself, a man of the world. They were the most productive years of his life, though the *Faux Monnayeurs* was still to come, and perhaps also the years in which the sense of an interior tension and drama was the most acute. In view of later developments, it is remarkable that the first political reference, so far as I can discover, is not earlier than 1903: "December 2nd. From Russia the most alarming news, which makes a sort of figured bass to all my thoughts." For the rest one will find here fascinating references to M. Gide's methods of composition, his diversions, his reading, what he does when alone, how he spends the day, hypochondria, idleness, love, travel, work, friends, music, meetings with Maurras, Barrès, Léon Blum, Mauriac, Claudel, d'Annunzio, Anna de Noailles and many others; the daily panorama of a writer's life displayed for us with a detail rarely equalled. Even without the interest of M. Gide's character, the journal enthralls us as a record of French bourgeois culture in the days before the great fissures had opened in it. Yet, given the years to follow, one looks forward with equal or even greater pleasure to the succeeding volumes.

Those who, like myself, have been unable to procure the French edition of the *Journals* will be greatly indebted to the publishers for having made this translation available. The translation itself is competent, even though one is perhaps nationally offended by Americanisms which ring strangely when associated with M. Gide. The notes, index and glossary of persons are all that one needs, indeed perhaps rather more, to follow the text.

Goronwy Rees.